



The HAF holiday programme at Northumbria University

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## Families back nationwide school holiday activities programme in record survey

As the half term holidays approach, a landmark survey of 20,000 parents and carers has revealed overwhelming support for the Government's [Holiday Activities and Food \(HAF\) programme](#), with families reporting significant benefits for both their children and their household finances.

The National Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Parent/Carer Evaluation Survey 2025 was led by Northumbria University and is believed to be the largest study of HAF provision ever undertaken in the UK.

The survey found that 92% of families said the programme helped them worry less about money during the holidays, whilst 95% said it made it easier to work or manage other responsibilities over the summer.

The Holiday Activities and Food programme, funded by the Department for Education, provides children and young people aged 5-16 who are eligible for free school meals with nutritious meals and enriching activities throughout school holidays. Last summer, over 624,000 children and young people attended HAF provision across England.

Conducted by Northumbria University in collaboration with the University of Lincoln and educational technology platform provider Eequ, the survey gathered responses from families across all 50 English local authorities that use HAF provision.

The findings paint a picture of a programme delivering multiple benefits for children. Almost all parents – 95% – reported that HAF helped their children take part in more physical activities, whilst 94% said their child tried new activities during their attendance. Nine in ten parents perceived that HAF helped their child become more confident, and 88% said it helped their child make new friends in the community.

The quality of food provision, a core element of HAF, was also highly rated, with 87% of parents reporting the food served was nutritious, 84% finding it culturally appropriate, and 81% saying their child enjoyed the meals provided.

[Professor Greta Defeyter OBE](#), Dean of Social Mobility Policy Engagement at Northumbria University and lead author on the survey, said: "To our knowledge, this is the largest survey of HAF provision ever undertaken in the UK, meaning the Government and others can have real confidence in the data we have gathered.

"With responses from 20,000 parents and carers from across 50 English local authorities, our survey comprehensively shows how HAF supports child development and helps ease the cost-of-living pressures. This rich detail will help to inform HAF's development in the short, medium and longer term.

"I am delighted that the UK Government confirmed HAF will be funded for a

further three years last summer. Local authorities and organisations can now plan effectively and fully integrate HAF into wider policies, programmes and activities, bringing real benefits to families and young people across the country."

The research also revealed that 42% of children attending HAF have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), highlighting the programme's reach amongst families who may particularly benefit from additional support during school holidays.

On average, children attended HAF for just over 10 days during the summer holidays, with primary school age children typically attending more days than their secondary school counterparts. In a bid to address this, Northumbria University researchers have worked closely with young people and HAF leads to co-design HAF+ - a version of HAF but with activities that appeal to teenagers.

The survey captured views from an ethnically diverse range of families, including White British (69.8%), Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (8.6%), and Asian/Asian British (7.5%) respondents.

Professor Paul Stretesky, Professor of Criminology at the University of Lincoln, and co-author of the report said: "At Healthy Living, we have been examining the pressures faced by parents and caregivers during school holidays for many years and the current evaluation with Eequ is our largest data collection effort since the Holiday Activities and Food programme began in 2018.

"Our findings demonstrate why government investment in local organisations and volunteers is critical for the health and wellbeing of parents and young people. While further evaluation of HAF funding is needed, the achievements to date are, according to these recently released data, truly inspirational."

More than 99% of survey respondents called for HAF to continue, with 92% saying it should carry on as it is and a further 7.6% suggesting it should continue with minor modifications.

Northumbria University's [Healthy Living Lab](#) has been leading research into holiday programmes, school meals and breakfast clubs for over two decades.

The team's work contributed to the Government announcing £600 million funding for HAF over the next three years last August and has previously demonstrated a Social Return on Investment of £8 for every £1 invested in the programme.

Northumbria was the first university to open its doors to run HAF Plus clubs on its campus in Newcastle city centre. During the 2024 and 2025 summer holidays, hundreds of young people attended HAF Plus events at the University, enjoying sporting activities in the sports centre, learning how to prepare healthy meals in the nutrition labs and taking part in employability skills sessions with careers experts.

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